

DO NOT WRITE ON ANY OF THESE PAGES

Directions

Women authors view on culture: After reading and taking notes on both excerpts from The Diary of Lady Murasaki and The Pillow Book. Answer all questions from both readings and then write a summary of the different views by the two women about life in the Heian Period in Japan. Talk about the similarities and differences of the two stories

Your separate piece of paper should look like this with the answers

Name:

Period:

Lady Murasaki

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Pillow Book

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Summary:

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Diary of Lady Murasaki*

Lady Murasaki Shikibu, the author of The Tale of Genji, left rich insights into her life and times in her diary. The following diary entry, which was written in about 1008, portrays life at the imperial court at the height of the Heian period in Japan. How did Lady Murasaki feel about court life?

My room is ugly, blackened by smoke. I play on a thirteen or six-stringed koto, but I neglect to take away the bridges even in rainy weather, and I lean it up against the wall between the cabinet and the door jamb. On either side of the koto stands a lute [Japanese biwa]. A pair of big bookcases have in them all the books they can hold. In one of them are placed old poems and romances. They are the homes of worms which come frightening us when we turn the pages, so none ever wish to read them. As to the other cabinet, since the person [her husband, a scholar in Chinese literature, who died in 1001] who placed his own books there no hand has touched it. When I am bored to death I take out one or two of them; then my maids gather around me and say: "Your life will not be favored with old age if you do such a thing! Why do you read Chinese? Formerly even the reading of Sutras was not encouraged for women."

They rebuke me in the shade [i.e. behind my back]. I have heard of it and have wished to say, "It is far from certain that he who does no forbidden thing enjoys a long life," but it would be a lack of reserve to say it to the maids. Our deeds vary with our age and deeds vary with the individual. Some are proud to read books, others look over old cast-away writings because they are bored with having nothing to do. It would not be becoming for such a one to chatter away about religious thoughts, noisily shaking a rosary. I feel this, and before my women keep myself from doing what otherwise I could do easily. But after all, when I was among the ladies of the court I did not say what I wanted to say either, for it is useless to talk with those who do not understand one and troublesome to talk with those who criticize from a feeling of superiority.

Especially one-sided persons are troublesome. Few are accomplished in many arts and most cling narrowly to their own opinion.

Pretty and coy, shrinking from sight, unsociable, proud, fond of romance, vain and poetic, looking down upon others with a jealous eye—such is the opinion of those who do not know me, but after seeing me they say, "You are wonderfully gentle to meet with; I cannot identify you with that imagined one."

I see that I have been slighted, hated, and looked down upon as an old gossip, and I must bear it, for it is my destiny to be solitary. The Queen said once, "You were ever mindful not to show your soul, but I have become more intimate with you than others." I hope that I may not be looked at obliquely even by those who are ill-natured, affected, and unsociable. . . .

from The Diary of Lady Murasaki (The Kenkyu[m]sha Publishing Company). Reprinted in Donald Keene, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1955), 153–154.

Discussion Questions

Clarifying and Summarizing

1. What forms of entertainment did Lady Murasaki pursue?
2. How did Lady Murasaki's maids react to her desire to read her husband's scholarly books?
3. How did ladies of the court who did not know Lady Murasaki view her?
4. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Based on your reading of this diary entry, do you think you would have enjoyed life at the imperial court during the Heian period? Why or why not?

Section 4

Sei Shonagon was a lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako during the last decade of the 10th century in Japan. This position afforded Shonagon an ideal opportunity to observe the people and customs at the royal court in Heian. Her observations are contained in a loosely organized collection of 185 sketches, lists, and anecdotes known as The Pillow Book. As you read this excerpt, think about how ladies-in-waiting like Sei Shonagon entertained themselves.

From the beginning of the fifth month, it had been dark, rainy weather all the time. I became so bored that at last I suggested we had better go out and see if we couldn't somewhere hear the cuckoo singing. This idea was very well received, and one of the girls suggested we should try that bridge behind the Kamo Shrine (it isn't called Magpie Bridge, but something rather like it). She said that there was a cuckoo there every day. Someone else said it was not a cuckoo at all, but a cricket. However, on the morning of the fifth day, off we went. When we ordered the carriage, the men said they didn't suppose that in such weather as this anyone would mind if we were picked up outside our own quarters and taken out by the Northern Gate. There was only one room for four. Some of the other ladies asked whether we should mind their getting another carriage and coming too. But the Empress said "No," and though they were very much disappointed we drove off rather hardheartedly without attempting to console them or indeed worrying about them at all. Something seemed to be happening at the riding ground, where there was a great press of people. When we asked what was going on, we were told that the competitions were being held, and that the archers were just going to shoot on horseback. It was said, too, that the officers of the Bodyguard of the Left were there; but all we could see, when we had pulled up, was a few gentlemen of the Sixth Rank wandering vaguely about. "Oh, do let us get on," someone said; "there's no one of any interest here." So we drove on toward Kamo, the familiar road making us feel quite as though we were on our way to the festival. Presently we came to my lord Akinobu's house, and someone suggested we should get out and have a look at it. Everything was

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very simple and countrified—pictures of horses on the panels, screens of wattled bamboo, curtains of plaited grass—all in a style that seemed to be intentionally behind the times. The house itself was a poor affair and very cramped, but quite pretty in its way. As for cuckoos, we were nearly deafened! It is really a great pity Her Majesty never hears them. And when we thought of the ladies who had wanted so badly to come with us, we felt quite guilty. "It's always interesting to see things done on the spot," said Akinobu, and sending for some stuff which I suppose was husked rice, he made some girls—very clean and respectable—along with others who seemed to come from neighboring farms, show us how the rice was thrashed. Five or six of

them did this, and then the grain was put into a sort of machine that went round, two girls turning it and at the same time singing so strange a song that we could not help laughing, and had soon forgotten all about the cuckoos. Then refreshments were brought on a queer old tray-stand such as one

sees in Chinese pictures. As no one seemed much interested in its contents, our host said: "This is rough country fare. If you don't like it, the only thing to do in a place like this is to go on bothering your host or his servants till you get something you can eat. We don't expect you people from the capital to be shy. These fern-shoots, now. I gathered them with my own hand." "You don't want us to arrange ourselves round the tray-stand like a lot of maid-servants sitting down to their supper?" I protested.

"Hand the things round," he said . . . and while this was going on, in the midst of the clatter, one of the men came in and said that it was going to rain, and we hurried back to our carriage. I wanted to make my cuckoo-poem before we started; but the

others said I could do it in the carriage. Before going we picked a huge branch of white-flower and decorated our carriage with it, great trails of blossom hanging over the windows and sides, till one would have thought a huge canopy of white brocade had been flung across the roof of the coach. Our grooms, throwing themselves into the thing, began with shouts of laughter squeezing fresh boughs of blossom into every cranny that would hold them.

We longed to be seen by someone on our way back, but not a soul did we meet, save one or two wretched priests or other such uninteresting people. When we were nearly home we made up our minds it would be too dull to finish the day without anyone having seen us in our splendor, so we stopped at the palace in the First Ward and asked for the Captain [Fujiwara no Kiminobu, the Empress's cousin], saying we were just back from hearing the cuckoo. We were told he had been off duty for some time and had got into easy clothes; but was now being helped into his court trousers. Wouldn't we wait? We said we couldn't do that, and were driving on to the Eastern Gate, when he suddenly appeared running after us down the road. He had certainly changed in a marvelously short space of time, but was still buckling his belt as he ran. Behind him, barefooted in their haste, panted several dressers and grooms. We called to the coachman to drive on and had already reached the gate when, hopelessly out of breath, he staggered up to us. It was only then that he saw how we were decorated. "This is a fairy chariot," he laughed. "I do not believe there are real people in it. If there are, let them get down and show themselves." . . .

When we were back in the palace, Her Majesty asked for an account of our adventures. The girls who had been left behind were at first inclined to be rather sulky; but when we described how the Captain had run after us down the Great Highway of the First Ward, they could not help laughing. Presently the Empress asked about our poems, and we were obliged to explain that we had not made any. "That is very unfortunate," she said. "Some of the gentlemen at court are bound to hear of your excursion, and they will certainly expect something to have come of it. I can quite understand that on the spot it was not very easy to write anything. When people make too solemn an affair of such things, one is apt suddenly to feel completely uninterested. But it is not too late. Write something now. You're good for that much, surely."

from Arthur Waley, trans., *The Pillow Book* (George Allen and Unwin). Reprinted in John D. Yohannan, ed., *A Treasury of Asian Literature* (New York: New American Library, 1956), 139–143.

Discussion Questions

Clarifying

1. Why do the ladies go to the bridge behind the Kamo Shrine?
2. How does Akinobu entertain the ladies when they come to his house?
3. **Comparing** Compare this excerpt by Sei Shonagon with Lady Murasaki's diary entry. Which description of court life do you think is more appealing? Explain your answer.